

Manuscript the papers of Isaac Archer
(Mrs. Wieland) loaned by A C Mrs Wieland,
on front page. The copy probably 48 Redcliffe Road
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only
copy

RABBI EZRA.

"Moses, Moses, I don't like the look of things. Why will you get engaged at twenty, when you don't want to marry until twenty-five?"

Old Ezra between his eye-lids looked through and through his son, as though he wished to decipher some flame-writing from the Cabbala in the interior of his head.

"I love Rebecca."

"You love the girl, Rebecca. How do you know that you love the girl, Rebecca? I would go so far as to believe that you love a small foot, a white skin, a beardless face; but how do you know that all that is the real Rebecca? You've studied Roman Law and Christian Law, but you have not studied women. I've brought you up carefully for twenty years, and now for my pains you want to start life by playing the ^{Schlemiel} schlemihl? How many women have you known Moses, if you can come to your old father and say you are in love?"

"I only know one, and I love her with all my heart."

"What do you mean by 'with all your heart'? - Have you learnt to know all your heart?"

"I ask you seriously, my dear father, to be good enough not to joke about my feelings."

"Moses, Moses, don't, now, be meschuggah. I tell you, don't now, be meschuggah. Let me tell you a story. Come, sit down

A C hand

by me on the velvet divan. I will tell you about my father and what he told me, when I was twenty. 'Ezra,' said he to me, 'when you marry, marry a rich wife. Listen to your father when he tells you that woman is a perishable. But, as for a shining thaler, Ezra, that can be preserved from generation to generation!' - Then did I bethink myself that he was an old man and I swore to him that my wife should have thirty thousand thalers. But, I will explain to you, Moses, all about the little woman, Lea, why I loved her, why I married her, why I lived in sorrow with her, until she passed away like snow in the hand. Because I did not know women, because I did not know even Ezra, my own self.

"Moses, I am an old man and want nothing more from the world than that it should go well with you. But at twenty, why what I felt was just like a fowl-run in the early morning, when the sun rises. When I went out along the streets and a Christian girl came along or one of our own breed, then I felt it in my finger-tips and wished that I had been King Solomon with five thousand wives. But she had to be fashioned as though the Lord had made her for his own self, understand me rightly, Moses, adorned with everything which a woman can possess in the way of precious things. If she were small and pale and thin and jerky like a rat, then would I drop my umbrella towards her side, because it gave me the eye-ache to look at her. But if she

waxed tall like the cedars in Lebanon, then I dropped my umbrella to the other side, and carried her image with me home, and looked at it over the pages of the Talmud, and even in the holy words did I hear the measure of her feet. And in the night did the vision come to me and seek me out in my dreams, - By the just God I had it before me, even as Moses, to whom you owe your name, had the promised land before him on Nebo; would I had been able to grasp it with my hands, for I saw the flow of milk and honey and yet could not cross the Jordan owing to the will of the Lord.

"Then did I say to myself - Moses, can you imagine what I said to myself? - well, I said to myself, 'you are a child of the devil, you have been one from your mother's womb. If you go on to yield to your lusts, if you go over the Jordan, then the wrath will find you out and you will be a child of death. You must not go unto women who delight the senses, but unto women who delight the heart, that is, if your flesh is not to become like the flesh of Job, if the work of your days and of your nights is not to be accursed, and if you are not to gobble grass like Nebuchadnezzar.'

"And on the strength of that did I go to old Hozekiel and told him he ought to give me his daughter Lea, and swore to him that I would do all that was right and usual. She was a girl was Lea, like a shadow on a window pane, you would have been

able to have taken her for a lamp shade, but I loved her because I thought that she would save me from myself, from the devil, and from death, which I felt over my head day and night. At the beginning she didn't want me because I was big and broad, and she was small and thin, so that she felt awkward when she walked out with me in the streets. But as nobody else came along she took me.

"And now, Moses, hear from your old father, how all our human reason is limited and how all our insight is vain. Even as you Moses, I had never tasted of the sweetness of love; I was still as pure as the dew on Hebron, even as you are, although you have studied Roman Law and Christian Law and have neglected Moses and the prophets. But when I tasted the sweetness of love with Lea, then did I realise that it is a sin before the Lord, and thanked the Lord that he had given me a wife that allowed me not to stray along the ways of the godless. For verily, in my lonely nights had I dreamed that love would rejoice the body like a balm, but lo, it tasted not sweeter to Lea and me, than medicine tastes to a sick patient. And so we took it, like one takes medicine with closed eyes and chokings in the throat and nothing more, according to the letter of the prescription, and when it had been properly taken, then one felt judged before God and damned, and we slunk away like thieves at night who have met each other for devilish handiwork. Then did I say to myself: 'your knowledge was right Ezra, fleshly love is the service of

Satan, and not worthy of being pursued by man! - But Moses, believe your old father, I was not happy.

"I was not happy, Moses, my son, the Lord is my witness, for I could talk as little to Lea as I can talk to my clothes-peg or as I can talk to my finger-nails. Her thoughts were not my thoughts, because my thoughts are my thoughts and because she had none ~~of~~ at all. Then I turned me to solitude, and solitude was chattier than my Lea, and said unto me: 'Ezra, you have bought a cat in a bag; on your own head is the responsibility. You should have tried her, to see if her spirit is made for your spirit, if her heart is brother to your heart. Do not let her see, Ezra, that you have bought a cat in a bag, for she is innocent as a lamb that goes down to drink. Why didn't you take as much trouble in your selection when you took a wife, as you do when you go into a shop and buy a tie for one and eleven-pence three pethings?'

"So I lived with her and suffered and was silent two years, and ever did I love my Lea, in that she had made me proof against the temptations of the flesh, until the time came when she should have given me a little boy, but she had no room for it, and it pleased the Lord to take her from me together with my child.

"And then, Moses, I felt, as if one had burnt the entrails out of my body with red-hot irons, as though the earth were burnt down and dead, as though I were left alone to bear the

curse. Then did I arise against Jehovah, then did I cry:
'Accursed be your name, why have you taken from me a wife that
I only chose to serve you! Are you struck down with idiocy
that you should crush your own child and spare your enemies!
Why can't you take the rich man's lamb; must you take it from
the poor man to whom it is his all! Accursed be your name!
Must you then give me over to temptation, must you push me
out into jeopardy and sin, must you let me again come into the
hands of the godless, after I had with toil and stress hidden
my soul from your wrath! Accursed be your name! accursed be
your name! On your own head be my damnation!' And then did I
go to drown my care, to the daughters of the wilderness. Yes,
Moses, that you may know it, I went to the daughters of the
wilderness. Not that I say unto you, my son, that you should
go unto the daughters of the wilderness. Do as you like. But
I, your father Ezra, I went unto the daughters of the wilderness.
And when I went, then did I curse Jehovah. 'It's your fault,
Lord, that I go to drown my cares unto the daughters of the
wilderness. Why have you taken from me my Lea?'

"And now, Moses, open your ears that you may understand
me right - I tasted of Christian girls, I tasted of Jewish
girls, I tasted of the daughters of Ham. I did not seek out
that which pleased my heart; I sought out that which pleased
my senses because I had come to drown my care, because I had
come to forget my Lea. I sought out for myself that which

waxed tall like cedars in Lebanon, that which was adorned with all that a woman can have in the way of precious things. And I found that the more she comforted my senses, the more reasonably could I speak to her, the more reasonably could she speak to me, the more affectionate did she become, the more did she comfort my heart. And I found, Moses, my son, that the more she comforted my senses, the less did I trace of sin, the more righteous was my conscience, the nearer did I feel to the Almighty.

"And Moses, even though you were to offer me half a million, I would not take it at the price of that knowledge. No I would not take it, for the knowledge bears interest, at twenty per cent, at thirty per cent, at a hundred per cent; and the interest is children and the children of children. You can be unhappy with half a million, but you cannot be unhappy with the knowledge that fleshly love is not the service of the devil, when man goes along the paths which the Lord shows, for he has made the two beings of mankind, each for the other, outside and inside, body and soul.

"I went on, I broke down, I beat my breast, I shrieked; 'Lord, Lord, I have heard your heavenly counsel. You catch the wise in their craft that they run in darkness by day and grope in noon as in the night! - And then did I go, Moses, and sought for myself a wife with all my senses. I found Sarah, the daughter of Mordecai, glorious to look on, as was the newly

created earth, and she became your mother. I tried her heart and her reins and I found that her heart is the brother to my heart. And in the marriage-night, Moses, my son, in the night to which you owe your life, then did I know that her body was the twin to my body; and I praised the Lord whose spirit lieth not, whose truth is revealed in his works."

Rabbi Ezra washed the sweat from his forehead - and breathed deep. Moses slunk away with bowed head.
